

Book Review: Net Smart: How To Thrive Online by Howard Rheingold (2012)

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The past few years have seen a cottage industry spring up around books addressing societal concerns about the Internet—specifically, its effects on our cognitive and emotional skills. Questions raised in books like *The Shallows* by Nicholas Carr raise concerns such as “Is Google making us stupid?” or “Are our smartphones diminishing crucial social skills?”

While these concerns are valid, technology also obviously enables capabilities and connections that previously could only be imagined. In the book *Net Smart: How to Thrive Online*, author Howard Rheingold, a lecturer at Stanford and UC Berkeley, aims to instill “digital know-how—the skills that will enable people to use the Internet mindfully and productively”—in his readers. Rheingold dispenses with “doom and gloom” scenarios and gets down to brass tacks—that is, relevant research findings concerning Internet and social media, their effects on society and citizenship, and the practical applications of this research.

The book is divided into five sections. Each section corresponds to a digital skill that Rheingold regards as essential: attention; the critical consumption of information; participation; collaboration; and network smarts. He believes that “knowing how to make use of online tools without being overloaded with too much information” is an essential skill for this century, citing the ability to drive a car (or to be an alert pedestrian) as but one example. Librarians will be pleasantly surprised at his emphasis on evaluating online sources, or what he calls “Crap Detection 101.” His [YouTube video](#) on the subject, which is 24 minutes long, could serve as an introduction to a library instruction session on evaluating online information (it could readily be subdivided if time is short). In fact, Rheingold has worked directly with librarians and teachers to create student guides on the subject. Along the way, Rheingold shares helpful websites to assist with health literacy, hoax detection, and more. He even (albeit briefly) addresses the digital divide. He believes that the “emerging digital divide” will be between those who can use social media individually and collaboratively, and those who cannot. The introduction of the book lays out its structure and compares the impact of the Internet on humankind to that of the invention of the printing press, not to mention the uneasy transition from an oral tradition to written manuscripts (e.g., Socrates argued that writing was bad because it discouraged memorization).

The first chapter in the book addresses the neuroscience of attention, including distraction, multi-tasking, and modern media. Some of the recent research on multitasking is shared here—for example, according to Clifford Nass of

Stanford University, most “multitasking” is actually rapid task switching instead of parallel processing. There are also tips on how to increase the all-important ability to “deal with distraction without filtering out opportunity.” Arguments and counterarguments for the harmful effects of the Internet (such as those made by Nicholas Carr) are summarized and addressed here, along with notes for further reading. Rheingold concurs that mindless Internet and social media consumption can be harmful, which is why he champions *mindfulness*, or focused attention. Surprisingly, Rheingold’s advice on sharpening one’s attention skills starts with meditation—specifically, with concentration on the breath. For example, a researcher he interviews notes people often briefly hold their breath when checking email as their mind races to determine the importance of the message; this “email apnea” can cause constant, low-level stress and by being mindful of your breathing, that stress can be lowered.

The second chapter discusses “information-filtering”, or what Rheingold calls “*infotention*: intention added to attention, and mixed with knowledge of information-filtering tools.” Some of these tools include “information dashboards” equipped with RSS feeds, Google alerts, and more (one site for this is [netvibes.com](#)). Rheingold addresses digital “know how”, or literacy, as a skill that is both individual and collective. He further defines the term literacy as skill that does not stand on its own; it also requires “social competency in using that skill collaboratively.” He stresses the importance of metacognition when using social media and the Internet in general: “You can’t make micro-decisions about how to deploy your attention in the moment unless you have made macro-decisions about how you want to spend your time.” Making decisions about what situations are appropriate for multiple channels of input, and which ones are not (e.g., a meeting with your boss), is part of this process.

Chapters three and four deal with, respectively, the “literacy of participation” and being “cybersocial.” This includes a discussion of various forms of social media and how they’ve been used to advocate, organize, and educate large groups of people. Many librarians are familiar with, if not avid users of, social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google Plus, not to mention ‘professional’ networks LinkedIn and ALA Connect. Wikipedia, Napster, and the blogosphere are cited as examples of Henry Jenkins’ “participatory culture,” or the wresting of content creation and publishing from a few media corporations to anyone with a laptop and an Internet connection. While he acknowledges that a good deal of this content consists of YouTube

cat videos and the like, he also offers an optimistic take on the potential for creative collaboration. Librarians who are familiar with the tools and concepts of Library 2.0, which focuses on user participation and collaboration, will recognize tools such as wikis, Flickr, tagging, and social bookmarking sites, among other tools. Rheingold offers plenty of support for his ideas. He cites Dunbar's work on primates and language, for example, as well as Ostrom's "institutions of collective action." The findings of these and other scholars are seamlessly woven into an overview of his own work on online collaboration over the years.

Rather than positing the Internet as either a Utopia or the cause of society's ills, Rheingold addresses both positive and negative aspects: the exciting solutions created by massive online collaboration (think crowdsourcing to help solve pieces of scientific and medical puzzles) versus privacy concerns, information overload, and the lack of coordinated information literacy instruction, for starters.

Chapter five deals with what Rheingold calls the knowledge of networks. "Most people in the world recognize, at some level, that a massive shift is taking place in the way" we use our attention. He mentions exciting innovations in the world of gaming, such as "massive multi-player 'alternate reality' games that take place in the physical world as well as cyberspace, involve thousands of people worldwide, and tackle real global-scale problems through collective intelligence." Personal learning networks (informal learning environments that individuals use to direct their learning, whether on and offline) are also addressed. He gives excellent etiquette tips for online groups and collaboration, such as "offer help freely" and "assume goodwill." He also discusses how to start and manage

online groups so that they don't become unruly. Online privacy and "dataveillance" (the surveilling of online activity) are touched upon. Rheingold doesn't believe it's possible to escape surveillance by the government and marketers, but he does offer suggestions to increase awareness. Remixing and copyright are also discussed. There is a brief section for concerned parents, offering advice and resources on digital citizenship.

Librarians will find a plethora of interesting topics covered, from cognitive science to crowd sourcing, gaming, social media, and aspects of information literacy. Of immediate use are the wealth of tips on attention focusing, online collaboration, networking and the development of personal learning networks. For example, I've used his "focus on your breath" tip when I feel overwhelmed by a large number of upcoming tasks. He seamlessly brings in the work of others (including Lawrence Lessig and danah boyd) to strengthen his points and includes detailed references so that readers may find out more about issues beyond the scope of the book. Many of the aspects of cognitive science discussed, such as attention filtering and executive control, have applicability for library instruction. Instruction librarians who teach for-credit courses will especially appreciate the wide variety of interdisciplinary sources Rheingold uses for his research, along with metacognition tools such as inattention and mindfulness that can be passed along to their own students. One of the book's advantages is that it does not need to be read sequentially for enjoyment—rather, the reader can dip into various areas of interest as needed. A further advantage to the e-book edition is that readers interested in related topics can skip directly to the hyperlinked references.

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Standards (http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/psych_info_lit), by mapping the information literacy standards to the undergraduate psychology major.

As a visual learner, I'm very interested in learning how to display our data in graphic ways and hope to learn more from the informative and thought-provoking LOEX 2013 conference presentation *Remix Your Data: Visualizing Library Instruction Statistics*, given by Brianna Marshall and Ted Polley from Indiana University. To download the speakers' slides, see <http://bit.ly/1kHeope>

While data visualization has some current buzz, there's nothing new about presenting numerical findings in a way that both visually appeals to and immediately impacts the receiver of the information. Talk about proclaiming our value: a particularly compelling graphic, *School Libraries & Student Achievement*, issued by the Library Research Ser-

vice, can be seen at <http://blogs.slj.com/neverendingsearch/2013/03/06/school-library-infographics-research-and-advocacy>.

I hope I've provided a little food for thought. Once you decide what part of your library instruction program you want to describe to your stakeholders it's just a matter of developing the appropriate methods to use to tell that story. Good luck!

The author thanks her colleagues, especially Josh Quan and Chris Strauber, who provided absolutely invaluable assistance to the creation of the most recent instruction data form.

Footnotes

1 Rollins, S. (2012). *Rethinking Library Instruction Statistics: Going Beyond the Numbers to Tell Our Story* [PowerPoint slides #5 and 6]. Retrieved from <http://blogs.library.msstate.edu/msuleets/materials/leets/2012/rollins.pdf>

2 Rollins, S. (personal communication, April 10, 2013)

3 Schattle, E. (personal communication November 21, 2013)

4 While this wiki is updated irregularly, it is still a useful document